

# AMERICA'S NATIONAL BALLET IN THE MAKING

Training at Merdlemuth Farm Marks Notable Advance Toward Ideals Inspired by Minnesota Girl, Who Had to Adopt Russian Name to Win



NEW NUMBERS BEING ARRANGED FOR NEXT SEASON



MADAME DESIRÉE LUBOVSKA, IN HER MOST SUCCESSFUL DANCE "LA NUIT"



MISS SHEILA O'DAY, MISS ESTER LUBIN and MISS REBECCA TRABUE OF MADAME LUBOVSKA'S BALLET



MISS JANET MCCLURE A MEMBER OF THE NATIONAL AMERICAN BALLET

MADAME LUBOVSKA, FOUNDER OF THE NATIONAL AMERICAN BALLET.

By TORREY FORD.

POSSIBLY America could get along without a national ballet. Other nations have gone far without one. But this purely utilitarian estimate of the matter is not to be tolerated in circles artistic and otherwise. Whether or not the country as a whole appreciates the need of it, the National American Ballet is well on the way toward development.

In spite of the high cost of dancing slippers, the popular demand for jazz and more jazz and the persistent box office pessimism of the theatrical producers the idea has gone forward. Plans have been conceived, articles of incorporation drawn up, the training camp opened and other details arranged to give America a dancing chorus that will be to the country in every way what the Imperial Ballet was to Russia prior to the Trotsky-Lenine regime.

## Training Season Now Open At Summer Home of the Ballet

Sponsored by social leaders and patrons of the arts, the inaugural demonstration of the ballet was given last February at the Town Hall. Yesterday the training camp opened for its initial season at Merdlemuth Farm, the summer home of the ballet, near Princeton, N. J.

While the actual formation of the ballet and the success of its early career may be credited to many sources, the original inspiration came from the typical experience of a typically American girl in a one sided tilt with the Russian ballet.

Six or eight years ago a slim, dark eyed girl from Minnesota arrived in New York city. There was very little of the spectacular about her entrance. She had a handbag, a carry-all trunk, a perfectly good mother, and she could dance. Otherwise her equipment for a metropolitan invasion was nothing to boast about.

Along with some hundreds of other girls who flocked in from all parts of the country, she had an idea that dancing was one of the accepted ways for a woman to gain fame, fortune and her name in the bright lights. Like the others, she felt fairly confident that New York was the one spot on the map where a girl could leap into prominence without giving an account of her past triumphs in other towns. There were at least a dozen girls on the same train who emphasized this point particularly.

Quite different from most of the others, the girl from Minnesota had evolved her own scheme of capturing the public. She had a dance that had never been done before on any stage. She danced more with her arms than she did with her feet. Judged mathematically, her dance was a challenge to the most complicated problem in solid geometry. She could perform more angles to the minute than the average girl could in a lifetime. There were other angular dancers in the profession, but no one of them had the repertoire of sensational details included in the dance of the girl from Minnesota.

## When She Failed to Take

The Managers Into Account

However, there were one or two elements that she had neglected to consider in planning her stardom. Chief of these, perhaps, was a certain exclusive body of bald headed gentlemen who, collectively and individually, direct the theatrical productions of the nation. In other words, she had omitted the manager from her schedule of worries. As the days went by she was rapidly undeceived on this point.

"Classic dancing!" groaned the man behind the perfect. "Now, we don't want no classics. Take 'em away."

"Highbrow stuff," commented another. "The public don't want it, I tell you. Give me something with a punch to it, a dance that flirts with folks' emotions."

"But my dance is emotional." The girl saw it was hopeless to appeal to the manager's intellect, but she had to try.

"Would it make the tired business man want to grab you up in his arms and carry you off to Rochester or Hoboken?"

"No," admitted the girl. "I'm afraid it isn't quite that kind of a dance. You see, it's classical."

"Bah!" said the manager. "Take it away." And she did. She wrapped the classic stuff up carefully in tissue paper, tied it with a pink ribbon and hid it in the bottom of her trunk. Then she went into the cabarets as a jazz artist and made good without half

trying. But with all the extra pocket money and the popularity among the patrons she kept remembering that by nature she was a classical dancer.

One day she came to terms with a semi-classical producer. The conversation followed the customary course. The producer began by asking impertinently where she came from.

"Minnesota," she admitted meekly. "That's bad," said the producer. "In fact, it's almost impossible. No American girl can get away with classic dancing. The public won't stand for it. You've got to be Russian or remain a nobody in the dancing game."

In the end they arranged a compromise. The producer agreed to allow more than the usual percentage of classic material, and the girl from Minnesota consented to become Mme. Desirée Lubovska of Russia et al. And now that we have revealed the identity of the Western girl as Lubovska, the triumphant, premiere danseuse, founder of the National American Ballet and exponent of a new artistic standard in American stage dancing, perhaps it is just as well to let Mme. Lubovska continue the story.

"Of course, I didn't like giving up my American name," she said. "It was almost like giving up my country. But the managers insisted. They said that while my dancing might please the public, I wouldn't be worth a nickel with an American name. I had to become a Russian whether I liked it or not."

## She Gets On After a Fashion Despite Handicaps in Vaudeville

"Coming from Rector's, where it was often difficult to find an audience in the mood for my dancing, I encountered other handicaps on the vaudeville stage. Sandwiched in between a black face comedy act and a song and dance skit there were times when it was quite impossible to send across the footlights anything that had much chance of awakening an enthusiastic response. But I did get on after a fashion."

"In London I ran as a headliner and came back to this country as premiere danseuse in 'Everything' at the Hippodrome. By that time I had become quite 'Russian.' My temperament, my talent, everything about me was explained by my Russian birth. It was rather flattering on the one hand, but perplexing at times to one's national conscience."

"Thinking it over, I decided it was all wrong. Why should an American girl be obliged to accept a foreign label before she could expect to gain any success in her own country? Why couldn't there be a made in America dancing that would have an even chance with the imported brands?"

"The answer was quite obvious. There was in New York no medium for classical dancing. Any young girl who came to town, no matter what her talents or ambitions, would be up against the same proposition that I faced. I made a few solemn vows that if I were ever in a position to change this order of things I would do my utmost whatever the cost."

And to-day Mme. Lubovska, the American girl with the Russian name, is the founder of the National American Ballet, Inc., and is serving as its first president. The purpose of the ballet is defined as an institution for the fostering, developing and training of American students devoted to the art of dancing and to provide a centre where ideas of the individual artist will be developed and properly presented.

The ballet will have up to one thousand members, selected from pupils who have reached the highest standards of artistic performance in various dancing schools throughout the country. Each year the organization will send on tour an original production, which will be constructed along the lines of grand opera, with each ballet headed by a recognized artist and all members given an opportunity of being featured according to the merits which they exhibit.

Whether or not the national aspect of the ballet will be carried to the point of a governmental control, as in other countries, has not as yet been decided. A Washington committee is working along these lines to discover if there is enough national interest in the ballet to make it a recognized Government institution.

Merdlemuth Farm will serve as a headquarters and training camp during the summer months. This is an extensive country estate, three miles out of Hightstown, New

Jersey, including two hundred acres of grounds, a large country house with two forty-foot rehearsal halls and accommodations for one hundred guests, and a farm house with fourteen rooms.

Here ballet members and students will gather during the preparation of productions, both for rehearsals and for the physical exercise which all artists are finding a necessary part of the training for an active dancing career. Physical culture, Grecian calisthenics and Olympic games will hold a regular place on the daily schedule.

## Professional Training to Begin For Dancers at the Age of 10

In connection with Merdlemuth Farm there will be a training school for girls who are not eligible for the ballet. No student may qualify for the ballet until she has reached the age of 16 years. Professional training will begin for dancers at the age of 10, carrying them five consecutive summers to the age of 16, when they should be qualified to enter the ballet productions. In no way will the organization conflict with the education of its dancers. The course will be conducted only during the summer months.

Requirements for entrance, either as students or members, include rhythm, physique, natural grace and seriousness of purpose. The ballet is founded not upon mere physical technique but a serious understanding, study and practice of the kindred arts, so that any American artist, whether he be painter, sculptor, designer, musician, author or dancer, may submit his work to be exploited through the medium of the art of the dance.

Although Mme. Lubovska is chiefly known as an Egyptian dancer, no department of dancing will be neglected in the school. The list includes Greek, toe ballet, classic, folk, dramatic, interpretative, pantomime, history and meaning of music, costume designing, scenery and lighting effects.

Arrangements have been made to accommodate at Merdlemuth Farm as guests mothers and chaperones, artists, singers, authors and students of the drama. Special courses will be open to guests who are not being trained as dancers. Guests may register for as brief a period as a weekend or for the entire season.

In the plans for the first summer there is no mention of the truly rural features of

farm life. Probably even a ballet dancer would hesitate at the necessity of rising at 4 A. M. to milk the cows. Haymaking under a 102 degree sun and weeding the garden through the back stretch of a sultry summer day has no official place on the daily programme. But moonlight dancing in a grove of trees is set down as an essential.

But however the details of the first encampment work out, Mme. Lubovska believes that the ballet has passed beyond the experimental stage. She confidently expects

## Visiting New York's Great Literary Shrine

NEW YORKERS are noted for their indifference to the attractions of their own city and its environs. Gothamites return from other States and sightseeing trips abroad and declare that "little old New York" is the best of all, but they seldom explain in what respect it rivals other States and cities. The fact is they can't. Frequently one hears people say in almost bragging tones that their country cousins know more about "sight places" in New York than they do themselves. Many others are driven to observe some handsome building, nearby bit of scenery or historical spot because some foreigner has written in praise of it.

Perhaps the reason for this is that so many things are brought to our attention every day the old interests are neglected for the new. That is why every once in a while we read with consternation that another city landmark whose chronicles simply teem with historical sentiment has been pulled down to make room for a new office building, factory or public institution.

New York can boast of the greatest literary shrine in America; and yet it is a deplorable fact that any gardener employed in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, immortalized by Washington Irving, will tell you that more pilgrims to the grave of the beloved author come from Idaho and the State of Washington than from New York. I know an Irving enthusiast who read every line of the great

that the first production next season will be a credit to American dancing methods and American dancers. Backed by some of the leading artists of the country and by many enthusiastic supporters of the scheme, Mme. Lubovska's task has not been as difficult as some pioneer work.

On the art board of the ballet are Mrs. John W. Alexander, Mrs. Langdon Geer, Mme. Lubovska, Mana-Zucca, M. D. Crawford, L. S. Rothafel, Victor Herbert, Walter Russell, Alexander Leftwich and Raymond Sovey.

The list of patrons and patronesses includes Mme. Anna Pavlova, Eleanor De Cisneros, Irene Castle, Lillian Gish, Minnie Madern Fiske, Mrs. Hilborne Roosevelt, Mrs. D. Callimahos, Mrs. F. L. Harrison, Daniel Frohman, Hugo Riesenfeld and Charles Boscowitz.

There has been as yet no nationwide response to the call for volunteers for the American ballet. Special trains have not pulled into New Jersey filled with dancers eager to participate in the movement. But there is every indication that the proposal has been met with approval and interest throughout the country. Sentiment favoring a purely American ballet, without drawing on talent from other nations, appears to be quite universally expressed.

Mme. Lubovska has absolute faith in the ability of American dancers to maintain a ballet that will not fall below the standard set by other countries, but she does not ignore the advantages to be gained from visiting other lands.

"My career has led me," Mme. Lubovska explained, "from an old Spanish home in the shadow of the palace of Porfirio Diaz in Mexico city to the giant stage at the Hippodrome."

"It may truly be said to have begun when as a little child I went with my mother to make our home in the capital of Mexico. For pantomime is the true basis of all interpretative dancing, and pantomime is more natural than speech to the Latin people, with whom I was surrounded during the most impressionable years of my life."

For a more faithful rendering of her favorite Egyptian dance, Mme. Lubovska went to Egypt and spent several months studying the country, the people and their customs. Besides her years in Mexico, she has lived in Europe and in South America. Yet she is as American as any girl from Minnesota can be.

It has been suggested that for an abso-

lute, 100 per cent, pure—as the expression goes—American ballet even the source of the dance should be restricted to American products. There are difficulties in adhering too closely to the nation's history and development. The native American Indian warwhoop dance, for instance, cannot readily be thought of in classical language. The Southern darkey jig has degenerated into the modern jazz and been discarded accordingly. Obviously, the American ballet must seek further fields.

A Puritan blue law ballet should come entirely within the range of modern dances. Exhuming the old laws and interpreting them according to the original Puritan intentions might serve posterity and present a spectacle which would be wholly pleasing to the human eye. Featuring the good as well as the bad aspects of the blue Sunday in a single dance should not be too undignified a pursuit for the ballet masters.

A California weather ballet, a rock ribbed Republican dance, a middle West symposium, a moonshine sonata, a Kentucky blue grass convention—all of these are available if the ballet people would consent to see America first.

## Glare and Glamour Fail to Offset Weakness in Way of Interpretation

While it may be held that these are subjects to be exploited in musical comedies and burlesque choruses, our own verdict is that anything which the lighter forms of entertainment can use with mediocre success can be converted into real success by genuine artists. Gorgeous as the ballet spectacle may be, technically perfect as their performances doubtless are, the interpretative part of the programme usually fails to meet the requirements of the average audience. If we could once sit through an evening of ballet and know what it was all about we should spend less time at the Ziegfeld Follies and more with the legitimate ballet.

Glancing over the schedule of an ordinary ballet evening, we come to an original Tibetan dance, a Cassandra (a Greek mythological dance), an Egyptian ceremonial dance, a Boyarsky (Russian court dance), a sun dance of the Aztecs. On no one of these subjects have we any certain knowledge. Without the programme we would be sure to confuse the Cassandra with the Boyarsky, and as far as getting on with our ballet education the evening would be a total loss. As we do not feel able to judge accurately the authenticity of the sun dance of the Aztecs the dance must show something besides glare and glamour to hold our attention.

If the ballet people would come down on our own plane, talk our own language and ask our cooperation, it would certainly hold out more allurements for the average man.

Perhaps the National American Ballet, Inc., will strive for the all-American ballet, from the dance itself to the dancing master. Perhaps not. At all events the American ballet plans to give the American girl an opportunity to make good in her own country under her own name. Only a few hyper-nated pessimists doubt the ultimate outcome.

author twenty-five years ago and promised himself an early visit to the sacred spots in Tarrytown and Irvington. Although he has lived in New York and passed Tarrytown by boat and train countless times not until quite recently did he set foot upon the land made famous by Irving.

Wealthy New Yorkers, however, have shown appreciation of Irving's land by buying and converting into estates practically all of the surrounding countryside. In fact, the only spot left to the public is Sunnyside Lane, which runs from the Albany Post road, or Broadway, as it is now called, to Sunnyside, the house in which Irving wrote "The Life of Washington" and many of the legends and in which the gentle spirit of America's greatest author passed away on November 28, 1859.

Sunnyside Lane most closely resembles some of the lanes in rural England. It is full of curves and delightfully shaded, although the sun pops through the trees at unexpected places as if it were playing hide-and-seek. And then suddenly you hear the brook, the thrilling brook, still "babbling down the ravine and throwing itself into the little cove where of yore the water guard harbored their whaleboats."

More than half way down the lane one comes to the big iron gate that guards Sunnyside, which Irving has described in "Wolfert's Roost." The pilgrim may follow the lane until it brings him to a spot where a splendid view of Tappan Zee may be obtained.

By walking a hundred feet along the railroad track one may get a fairly good peep through the trees and shrubs at Sunnyside.

side, the "little old fashioned stone mansion, all gable ends, and as full of angles and corners as an old cocked hat."

Every inch of this locality teems with historical traditions and legendary lore. While gazing over the waters of Tappan Zee, celebrated in New York's history, one's mind reverts to the doings there of other days when "stout galleys armed with 18-pounders and navigated with sails and oars cruised about like hawks." And then he is suddenly brought back to the present by a striking contrast when an excursion boat gives a sociable squeak as it passes peacefully up the river.

One wonders what old Wolfert Eckers, who built "Wolfert's Roost," and whose motto, placed over the door, was "Lust in Rust," which being interpreted means "Pleasure in Quiet," would think of the noise made by the passenger trains that tear past the Roost every few minutes, with say nothing of a fifty car freight train, with its locomotive belching fire and smoke and its chains and rusty joints rattling, creaking and gliding around the curves like a giant dragon.

There is in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery a headstone that proclaims the resting place of Wolfert Eckers. Only the noise of the automobiles passing along Broadway reach the spot, and what remains of Wolfert may still find "Lust in Rust."

In visiting Sunnyside one should leave the New York Central train at Irvington and walk a few blocks up the main street to Broadway. Then turn to the left and follow Broadway until a little blue sign attached to a post indicates Sunnyside Lane.